

A young woman wearing a white headscarf and a brown sweater is working in a greenhouse. She is holding a white plastic sheet, and the background shows the metal structure of the greenhouse and some potted plants.

AGRICULTURAL SHEROES

**THE HIDDEN STORIES OF
PALESTINIAN WOMEN**

The agriculture sector in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is crippled with multifaceted structural challenges. However, within the sector itself, women face another layer of challenges arising from the gender roles and responsibilities that are strongly defined by social norms. The gender division of labour in the agriculture sector depends upon the specific agricultural commodity and the various stages of the value chain. The level of engagement of men and women vary in different aspects of the value chain, for example there is limited women's participation in the input supply. Women's participation in the agriculture sector is highly concentrated at the early stages of the value chain such as labouring on the land, which is characterised by low pay and limited decision making.

Informal social norms, in particular, gender differences about the definition and perceptions of women's work and men's work play a strong role in determining women's position and power in the agriculture sector. For example, the definition of "farmer" particularly from the perspectives of the agriculture market actors has highlighted that some organisations define "farmer" as the one who owns and manages the farm or land. This narrow definition eliminates many female workers within the agriculture sector from being considered farmers. Women are also disproportionately responsible for unpaid domestic work and family duties, which limits their time and energy to invest in small-scale enterprise development or wage employment. All these factors limit the recognition, the value, and the visibility of women's contribution to the agriculture sector.

This is a series of case studies of women's valuable contributions to the agriculture sector at the farm, factory, and entrepreneurial levels.



GREEN GIRLS AND AGRIBUSINESS;

adapting to a harsh reality or making a choice?

Nadine, Aseel and Ghayda were struggling to find employment after graduating. They decided to join together and set up their own agricultural business, breaking the norms of the predominant cultural expectations set for young women and to be financially independent. But it was not an easy journey.

The village of Khuza in Khan Younis is home to the three women. Aseel holds a bachelor's degree in primary education, Ghayda is an English business graduate, and Nadine is a banking and finance graduate. As a result of political instabilities, the Gaza strip has high levels of unemployment and Aseel, Nadine and Ghayda were unable to secure jobs after graduating.

Therefore, they decided to devote their time volunteering and supporting local initiatives at youth centres and NGOs in Khuza.



Nadine Abu Al Rok, Aseel Al Najar and Ghayda Qudih working in the land, Khuza, Khan Younis. Photo by: Sanad Abu Latifa/OXFAM 2021

This was how the two close friends Ghayda and Aseel met Nadine. The three of them spent years volunteering and were all proud to contribute to their society. Nonetheless, they held aspirations to become financially secure and independent. They decided they needed to start their own project.

Like most fresh graduates, the three young women did not have the money needed to embark on an enterprise, but they were adamant to start with whatever means possible. Nadine's father suggested renting land to grow crops. The women decided to take up a one year lease on a three acre piece of land and sought technical advice from Ghayda's and Nadine's fathers. This was the beginning of their journey.

The three friends had mixed feelings about the project. There were times when they were overwhelmed, scared, and sceptical, but they were determined to succeed. Their families' were very supportive of their plan.

“The first day we went to the land, we realised how big it was. We were all overwhelmed, and couldn't help record a video making fun of ourselves, and asking people what to plant?” Aseel explained.



Portrait of Ghayda Qudih, Khan Younis. Photo by: Sanad Abu Latifa/ OXFAM 2021

As soon as the video hit the internet, it went viral. Numerous press agencies started contacting them. Social media played a significant role in raising awareness of their project and introduced the women to the wider community and most importantly to their future market.

There were significant challenges to overcome; firstly their lack of any agricultural experience, secondly was access to funds from NGOs, banks, or credit from agricultural input suppliers. In the end support from NGOs provided half the amount the women needed, leaving an additional

300 ILS (USD 90) each to kickstart their project. This was no easy task since they were unemployed, and neither of their families had the financial means to support them. The secured funds went towards purchasing seedlings, as the land rental was negotiated to be paid after the first harvest. In addition, they had to find 1200 ILS (USD 366) to install an irrigation system.

They decided on their crop. Peas would be the most viable option as they required low cost inputs and could be harvested up to three times per year.

It was not just the operational costs that proved challenging but also the impact of the blockade on Gaza. Due to the high costs of renting agricultural land, the women could only afford to rent land in the eastern part of Khuza, close to the perimeter fence.

However, this land is cheaper for a reason; the close proximity to the fence means that the land is directly exposed to the impact of the Israeli occupation. They were vulnerable to intimidation by Israeli soldiers, and frequent check point closures inhibited their access to their land. They also could not afford to erect fencing to protect their crops, which made them vulnerable to passer-by's and animals.

However, they did not let these obstacles stop them. Aseel would wake up every day at the crack of dawn and walk to meet her friends at the site, where they would plan the day's work, prepare orders, and cultivate their land.

They had to work 12 hours a day. Ghayda shared how difficult it was to work under the scorching sun and how they constantly suffered from sunburn.

"I am so happy I started this project, but I now know how physically exhausting and psychologically stressful it is. All I think of is the land. I spend 12 hours a day on the land. The girls and I were exhausted, but we couldn't afford to hire more workers" Aseel explained.



Nadien Abu Rok (left), Ghayda Qudih (middle) and Aseel Al Najjar (right), preparing peas, Khuza, Khan Younis.
Photo credit: Sanad Abu Latifa/ OXFAM 2021

Ghayda's home was close to the land, so the women used it as a place where they could take a rest during the day.

"My father opened his house to the three of us, and we could use it to rest and to use the toilet, or even to take a nap. The project would have never come to be without our families support" Ghayda said.

The girls had to learn everything about working on the land and cultivation of crops. In the winter the heavy rains damaged the plants. This resulted in some losses. This was devastating for them. It was their first introduction to the impact of extreme weather events on agriculture.



Ghayda Oudih (left), and Aseel Al Najar working in the land, Khuza, Khan Younis. Photo by: Sanad Abu Latifa/ OXFAM 2021



Portrait of Ghayda Qudih, Khan Younis. Photo by: Sanad Abu Latifa/ OXFAM 2021

“I was exhausted because of the cold weather. I remember going to the land and crying when I saw our peas dying. I treat the farm like my baby, and can’t bear seeing any harm coming to it” Aseel told us.



Due to all their hard work, dedication, and commitment, the pea harvest was a success. They harvested 110 kilos of peas which they sold locally under their own brand called “Green Girls”. Now, with financial and technical support from OXFAM, they were able to rent a further 5 dunums and plan to cultivate a new high yield variety of carrots called ‘Fidra’.

The support of their families’ was instrumental to their success. Aseel’s brother proudly boasted about his sister’s success, posting her photos all over social media. This was a highly unconventional, given the very conservative nature of the Gaza society.

“I remember the first time I earned money and I gave my dad 100 ILS (USD 31). It was a bit awkward for him, but deep down, I was super happy to be able to help” Aseel recalled with a joyful voice.



Ghayda and Nadine find working on the land very exhausting. They would much rather find salaried employment and utilise their university degrees. Despite their profound belief in their enterprise, they confront new challenges every step of the way. Their experience exposed them to the various inequalities and to the endless constraints the agriculture sector faces in the Gaza Strip. With no health or agricultural insurance, weak markets and purchasing power, as well as limited government subsidies supporting agriculture, entering the agricultural sector is daunting, especially for young women. At times, Aseel, Nadine and Ghayda say it feels like climbing a steep mountain.

Nadine Abu Al Rok (left), Ghayda Qudih and Aseel Al Najjar (right) on their land, Khuza, Khan Younis. Photo by: Sanad Abu Latifa/ OXFAM 2021



The three dream of achieving independence. This was a significant motivation to venture into agribusiness in the future. They wish to share their experiences and plan to develop a youth mentorship scheme to act as an incubator for young entrepreneurs. Nadine, Aseel and Ghayda aspire to one day run their own food processing plant, and to sell their Green Girls products all over Gaza and to the West Bank.

A DETERMINED WOMAN TURNS CUCUMBERS INTO BUSINESS SUCCESS

Jenan Hamashi lives in the village of Kufr Dan in North West Jenin in the Occupied West Bank. Jenan is a 48 year old farmer and a mother of four children. Despite social and economic barriers that challenge her rights, she has been able to turn cucumber cultivation into a thriving business that has helped to develop her community.

When Jenan was 18, she was forced into an arranged marriage. She wanted to finish her education, but then she fell pregnant. Her family forced her to leave college to look after her family and work with them cultivating their land. She always thought about finishing her education, but taking care of her children and making sure they had future opportunities became her priority.



Jenan Hamashi helps her daughter with her homework in the garden of her house in Kufr Dan. Photo by: Suhaib Jarrar /OXFAM 2021

*“It is too late for me now, but not for them...
I want my children to finish their education,
that’s why I always help them with their homework.”*

In her mid-thirties, when her children were old enough to look after themselves, Jenan had more free time on her hands which she was keen to fill. She started participating in various training courses, and spent time volunteering for different organisations. She soon realised that she could help create an environment for women to enable them to take part in the economic development of their families.



Jenan Hamashi carrying some home pickled cucumbers in her home in Kufr Dan. Photo by: Samar Hazboun /OXFAM 2021

In Jenan's village, the main source of income for farmers was growing baby cucumbers. Farmers had the land and the resources, but when it came to marketing their produce their main buyers were the Israeli pickling factories which controlled the value chain and the price.

"My heart breaks every time I see farmers throwing away their cucumbers when Israeli crossings close down. We needed to do something about this."

OXFAM helped establish a new pickling factory in the village which bought cucumbers from the farmers for a competitive price. It also served the local market with pickles, reducing the dependence on external providers for supplies. The success of the pickling factory was due to farmers being able to buy shares in the factory. Jenan didn't hesitate to seize the opportunity. She collected all her money and bought shares in the factory. She noted: "It was a great opportunity for all of us. I participated in a six month mini-MBA program with OXFAM, and learned everything about running a new investment."



Jenan Hamashi checking the pickle barrels in Kufr Dan. Photo by: Samar Hazboun /OXFAM 2021

Jenan, equipped with knowledge and experience decided to lead the way for other women to break stereotypes and joined the cooperative. Jenan and other women became shareholders in the factory. They gained a voice, and became decisions-makers in the factory's development.

“Women were surprised by the idea, as the cooperative was all men...We joined the cooperative, and we were soon accepted. I feel independent now and I’m being heard.”



Jenan Hamashi in the new pickling factory in Kufr Dan making sure the labeling line is functioning properly. Photo by: Suhaib Jarrar / OXFAM 2021



The project was a turning point in Jenan's life. She have worked and fought hard to obtain her rightful place. "My husband was hesitant at the beginning because they are not used to women participating in cooperatives, but now he is fine with it. I have earned the respect of his family and they now have trust in my abilities. I may not have a degree, but I have knowledge and experience. People listen to me and come to me for advice. That in itself is very rewarding."

Jenan Hamashi working at the pickling factory in Kufr Dan holding one of the first pickle cans.
Photo by Suhaib Jarrar / OXFAM 2021

HOW A NEW GRADUATE HAS TO ADAPT

Shahd Al-Sharif, 23, lives in the city of Hebron, in the southern part of the West Bank. Shahd couldn't wait to complete her degree in food manufacturing and graduate from college to embark on a new career path and be independent. Unfortunately, Shahd soon realised that finding a job as a new graduate in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is incredibly challenging. Employers often ask for experience that Shahd didn't have.

Shahd has always loved plants and feels a special connection to them.

"These plants can read you, whenever I am sad, a plant would die or a branch would break, they feel you."



Shahd Al-Sharif sitting in her the living room in her house in Hebron. Photo by: Samar Hazboun /OXFAM 2021



Shahd Al-Sharif works at her greenhouse in the city of Hebron preparing the soil to grow new plants with the help of her mother. Photo by: Samar Hazboun /OXFAM 2021

For a while, Shahd was despondent about her future. To help her out of her slump she decided to use her parents' garden to work on a project she had always been passionate about. Shahd noted: "I was always interested in agriculture, and I love house plants in particular. I wanted to share that with others, so I decided to use my parents' garden to grow plants and sell them to people."

Things started well. Shahd enjoyed every moment she spent with her plants and running her own businesses.

"I couldn't find a job, but now I run my own business. I wanted my project to grow. For that I needed a greenhouse to shield my plants from heat and cold, and to care for them properly, but I never thought a greenhouse would cost so much."



Shahad checking on leaves and caring for plants she was growing in her parents' backyard in Hebron as she started her new project. Photo by: Samar Hazboun/ OXFAM 2021

Shahd started looking at options in order to fund a greenhouse, and to help fulfil her dream. It was at this time that Shahd heard about one of OXFAM's projects that was able to provide her with the greenhouse she needed. "I was running out of money and hope, but then this support came at the right moment. It's not just about the financial support, I really feel like a business owner who is now living her dream."

Shahd is now an inspiration to her peers who have witnessed first-hand what someone with a dream and determination can accomplish.


“Young girls now ask for my advice on how to apply for grants and how to start their own business. This is really inspiring.”



Shahd Al-Sharif works at her greenhouse in the city of Hebron. Photo by: Samar Hazboun /OXFAM 2021



Shahd celebrates her success with her family; they were all very supportive of Shahd's endeavours from the very beginning. "My parents started seeing my success and they accepted this as my career. They are really supportive, and allow me to participate in different trainings that will help develop my business, even if it required staying overnight away from home. They trust me very much and don't care about what other people say."

A young woman wearing a white hijab and a brown sweater is looking upwards with a smile. She is surrounded by cherry blossom branches with white and pink flowers. The background is a soft-focus view of a building and a clear blue sky.

*"People say I am young
and don't take me
seriously. I don't care
about that. You will
always face setbacks,
you will always face
challenges, but you
should always keep on
chasing your dream."*



EMBRACING THE SPIRIT OF AGRICULTURE

Soad and Sobhia have worked on their family farm for 40 years. They can't imagine doing anything else and describe how happy they feel being at one with the land.

"We have been working on the farm our entire lives. We enjoy farming and we do it with great pleasure and satisfaction. No one is forcing us to do what we do" Sobhia said.

Soad, 70yrs, and Sobhia, 57yrs, have both lived here for decades. They both live happily with their extended families near Khan Younis surrounded by their relatives, friends, neighbours and children.



Portrait of Sobhia Al-Astal, a female farmer, Khan Younis, Gaza Strip. Photo credit: Sanad Abu Latifa/OXFAM 2021

Working in agriculture was not easy. Soad and Sobhia had to deal with many of the restrictions caused by the Israeli blockade and occupation.

During the 1980s, the Israelis imposed an array of restrictions on daily life in the Gaza Strip, the most severe was the daily curfew. The curfew restricted access to the farm and hampered their ability to tend to their crops. This led to poor yields and huge financial losses.

Soad and Sobhia still reminisce about a time forty years ago when agricultural crops were healthy and produced high yields because of good water quality and higher rainfall. There were plentiful harvests and products were sold for a good profit in local and external markets.

"In the past, a farmer's income was far better than a doctor's. We used to sell our vegetables in the local markets, and exported the surplus abroad, to Israel and other countries. But now working on the farm barely covers expenses" Soad said.

Despite their extensive agrarian experience, living under a blockade plus the changing climate affected their livelihood on the farm. The Israeli imposed blockade weakened the economy and the value chains, farmers were unable to access good quality fertilisers and pesticides.

The blockade meant that surplus products, previously sold to foreign countries could no longer be exported. Local markets became saturated and prices drastically dropped. These restrictions also drove daily imported commodity prices higher and the cost of living increased. In addition, the women reported that in recent years the hotter weather has adversely affected overall crop yields. Subsequently, farming was no longer sustainable means of earning an income. Like many other small scale farmers Soad and Sobhia found themselves struggling to make a living.



Soad Al-Astal and Sobhia Al-Astal preparing tomatoes for the market. Khan Younis, Gaza Strip. Photo credit: Sanad Abu Latifa/ OXFAM 2021

"Due to the blockade, on many occasions, we were unable to find certain pesticides, in addition to difficulties finding plastic sheets in the market, which we use to cover and protect crops against the elements in the field" Soad explained.

For many, income from agriculture was no longer a viable option, especially for women who were still expected to perform household tasks. Consequently, many women gave up farming. Soad and Sobhia used to get up at the crack of dawn, and head off to the farm after completing their household chores. These included washing dishes, feeding the chickens, baking bread in clay ovens, and handwashing laundry. Farming was no longer able to meet their needs and their daily lives became a huge struggle.


"When we were young, we spent most of our day on the farm, and the rest of the time doing our housework" Soad added.

In the late 1990's Soad and Sobhia were among the first farmers in the Gaza Strip to grow grape seedlings in greenhouses, whilst other farmers continued grow more traditional crops, such as cucumbers and tomatoes, in open fields. Between 1997 and 2015, their one-acre plantation of grape vines yielded more than one ton of vine leaves- These are used in many traditional dishes. Their annual income averaged 10,000\$; "the golden days" Soad recalls. The harvesting time was an opportunity for women in the area to work and have their own source of income, as well as a chance to spend time together and bond. Sobhia and Soad reminisce about gathering all the female farm workers for tea after a long day spent harvesting the vine leaves.

At this time the quality of their vine leaves became the local market standard. However, unfortunately the grape vines grew old, and eventually died.



Sobhia Al-Astal collecting grape leaves, Khan Younis, Gaza Strip. Photo by: Sanad Abu Latifa/OXFAM 2021



The changing climate and economic conditions forced Sobhia and Soad to investigate alternatives such as cultivating tomatoes and other vegetables in their old greenhouses. With support from OXFAM, they established new greenhouses to grow a new variety of grape seedlings which are more resilient to the changing climatic conditions. This transition has taught them a lot about patience, as the new seedlings need two years of weekly, meticulous, weeding and irrigation before they can start harvesting their grapes. In the meantime, they remain optimistic that their greenhouses will be productive and that the markets will improve, both locally and internationally.

"Working on the farm taught us to be patient. If the harvest this year is not abundant, we say it is fine, next year will be better" said Sobhia.



The local community's support and care was instrumental in keeping up their spirits throughout their tough journey. Every day they would slowly travel back to their home on their donkey cart and use this opportunity to chat together and with neighbours. It seems the donkey enjoyed this routine, and would walk even slower. The donkey became quite well known in the area as Soad and Sobhia's 'Slow Donkey'.

To Soad and Sobhia, agriculture is more than a job,
it is vocation. Their relationship to the land is
almost spiritual and is part of their identity.



